Chapter Three

POOR PEOPLE'S REALITIES

The Professional Challenge

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POOR PEOPLE'S REALITIES

A person, who is not poor, who pronounces on what matters to those who are poor is in a trap. Self-critical analysis, sensitive rapport, and participatory methods can contribute some valid insight into the lives, values, priorities and preferences of poor people. We can struggle to reconstruct our realities to reflect what poor people indicate to be theirs. But there will always be distortions. We can never fully escape from our conditioning. And the nature of interactions between the poor and the non-poor affect what is shared and learnt. In what follows, however much I try, I cannot avoid being wrong in substance and emphasis. For, I am trying to generalise about what is local (both rural and urban), complex, diverse, dynamic, personal and multidimensional. And this I do from scattered evidence and experience, perceived, filtered and fitted together in a personally idiosyncratic way.

Error is inherent in this enterprise. But if the reality of poor people is to count more, we have to dare to try to know it better.

More and more experience has been showing that participation, empowerment and mutual respect can enable poor people to express and analyse their individual and shared realities. Their realities — as they are expressed — differ according to differences in their environments, resources, experiences, values, cultures, livelihood strategies, and experiences of life. We can talk, empirically, of multiple realities; and we can talk, normatively, of privileging the multiple realities of different poor people.

When poor people express, share and analyse what they know, experience, need and want, they bring to light dimensions which normal professionals tend to miss or misperceive. In contrast with the universal, reductionist, standard, static, controlled and secure realities sought by many professionals, the realities which poor people know and show are local, complex, diverse, dynamic, and difficult to control.

Livelihoods: Diverse and Complex

Contrary to common professional prejudice, the livelihoods of most poor people are usually diverse and often complex. This can be illustrated by the analogy of hedgehogs and foxes, and the saying that "The fox has many ideas but the hedgehog has one big idea".[1] Most full-time employees found in the North, and in industrial sectors in the South, are hedgehogs, with a single job and source of support. Other hedgehogs are those poor people, often powerless, desperate or exploited, who have but one survival strategy — slaves and bonded labourers, and many (though not all) of those who are outworkers tied to a single supplier-buyer, sex workers, beggars, vendors, and other occupational specialists. But most poor people in the South, and more now in the North, are foxes. They have not one source of support but

several. They maintain a portfolio of activities, with different members of the family seeking and finding different sources of food, fuel, fodder, cash and support in different ways, in different places, at different times of the year. Their living is improvised and sustained through their livelihood capabilities, through tangible assets in the form of stores and resources, and through intangible assets in the form of claims and access.

Fox strategies are rarely adequately recognised by outsiders. They are unlikely to be fully revealed, if at all, by conventional questionnaire surveys. The schedules and questions, interactions, incentives and processes of questionnaire surveys tend to construct a standardised, short and simple reality. "Many aspects of rural livelihoods are not captured in either income or consumption-based survey data. This is because they are neither commodities, nor evident enough to the researchers to be allocated 'imputed values'...Energy (fuelwood) and herbal medicines are two examples. A significant element of the 'safety net' for many rural people in times of stress consists of 'famine foods' which can be gathered from bush and fallow lands..." (Norton, Owen and Milimo 1994:93)

The ingenuity and opportunism of poor people, and the diversity and complexity of their livelihood and survival strategies, can be illustrated by case studies and the accounts of social anthropologists and others. Even within the same village, different social groups of the landless can have completely different strategies. Usually, an individual or a household engages in several or many livelihood activities over a year. Two of the most obvious and well recognised activities are: *cultivating field crops and keeping livestock*—both for self-provisioning and for barter and cash income. But in addition, the multiplicity of sources of food, income, support and means of survival include: *home gardening* (both rural and urban) and the *exploitation of micro-environments*. Seven studies in Indonesia reported the proportions of household

income deriving from home gardens as being variously 10-30, 20-30, over 20, 22-33, 41-51, and 42-51 per cent, while another Indonesian study found the proportion higher among the poor, providing 24 per cent of their income compared with 9 per cent for the well-off (cited in Hoogerbrugge and Fresco 1993:12); *common property resources* (CPR) — fishing, hunting, grazing, gathering, quarrying and mining variously in lakes, ponds, streams, rivers, the sea, shores, forests, woodlands, swamps, savannahs, hills, wastelands, fallow land, roadsides, hedges, rocky places, quarries and mines,[2] for any of a vast range of fish, animals, birds, insects, fodder, wild foods, fibres, building materials, fuel, fertiliser, medicines, minerals such as gold, and much else. CPRs are often a major source of livelihood for the rural poor, and a safety-net fallback source of food and income in bad times; *scavenging* (mainly urban), *beachcombing* (seaside) and *gleaning* (mainly rural), including traditional rights and access to private residues (buttermilk, crop residues as fuel etc.); *processing, hawking, vending* and *marketing* — including preparation and sale of food, beer, liquor, vegetables, other produce from home gardens and common property resources, and items scavenged; *share-rearing of livestock* where livestock are lent for herding in exchange for rights to some products and/or offspring; *transporting goods* by horse, donkey, mule, ox, cow, camel, llama or yak, by animal-drawn cart, by bicycle, barrow or sledge, or by head or backloading; *mutual help*, including small borrowings from relatives and neighbours, and loans from savings groups; *contract outwork* — weaving, rolling cigarettes, making incense sticks; *casual labour* and piecework especially in agriculture; *specialised occupations* — barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, sex workers, tailors; *domestic service* — especially by girls and women; *child labour* — domestic and agricultural work at home: fetching water, collecting fodder and fuel, weeding, picking coffee, tea or cotton, herding animals, removing stones from fields and ticks from livestock; and working away from home, in factories, shops, restaurants, people's houses; *craft work* of many sorts, making pots, baskets, carvings, ornaments, beadwork, toys, etc. especially

in the off-seasons; *mortgaging and selling physical assets,* future labour and children; *family splitting,* including putting children out to others; *migration* for seasonal work in agriculture, brick-making, urban construction etc., or to other countries; *remittances* from family members who are employed away; *seasonal food-for-work, public works and relief; stinting,* in many ways, with food and other consumption; *begging; theft;* and *discrimination and triage,* especially with girl children and weaklings.

This is, however, only an illustrative list.

Combinations of such activities are not "employment" in "a job" in "a workplace". Employment, in the formal sense of having an employer and a job, is a reductionist northern and industrial concept, and is a subset of livelihood. It is only one of the means by which livelihood can be secured. For many of the poor, the strategy is fox-like. It is to do many things: to sniff around and look for opportunities, to diversify by adding enterprises and to multiply activities and relationships. It is to use not one but many means to gain food and cash, to reduce vulnerability and to improve the quality of life, it is partly because of the focus on formal employment, the diversity of activities of the urban poor has been underperceived.

Agricultural, Pastoral and Forest-Based Livelihoods

Let me introduce here the concept of the **Third Agriculture**. The *first,* or *industrial agriculture,* found in the North, and in plantations in the South, is standardised and simple. The *second,* or *green revolution agriculture,* found in the South, is also relatively uniform and simple, with high-yielding packages of practices applied in controlled conditions. The *third agriculture* differs from these being complex, diverse, and risk-prone (CDR). This third, CDR agriculture, has been relatively neglected and misperceived.

Yet its significance is difficult to exaggerate. A recent estimate (Pretty 1995) suggests that the number of people

supported by industrial agriculture are some 1.2 billion; by green revolution agriculture, some 2.3 to 2.6 billion; and by CDR agriculture, some 1.9 to 2.2 billion. For two reasons, CDR agriculture is now a priority. First, it must be supporting a majority of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world; and second, through what Pretty terms *regenerative agriculture*, much of it has a potential for two-fold or three-fold increase in production with little or no use of external inputs.

The strategies of CDR farmers differ from those of industrial and green revolution farmers, who often seek to standardise, simplify, control, substitute capital for labour, and minimise management. In contrast, CDR farmers often seek to reduce risk and increase food and income by complicating, diversifying and intensifying labour use in their farming systems, adding to their enterprises and maximising management. Many are skilful engineers: they build bunds, confine, control and concentrate rainwater flows, flatten fields, and shape land in a myriad of ways. They make, manage, and exploit spatial niches such as silt deposition fields, termite mounds, animal pens, and other pockets of fertility which contain, capture and concentrate nutrients, soil and water. They multiply the internal links and flows within their farming systems, through creating and exploiting micro-environments, through aquaculture, composting, cut-and-carry for stallfed livestock, cover crops, manuring, multiple and serial cropping, agroforestry, home gardening, and the use of kitchen waste; and they bring in resources such as fodder, fuel, fibre, nutrients, soil and water from outside the boundary limits of their farms.

CDR farmers do not follow fixed procedures. They continuously improvise and adapt. Each season and year is different. What they do, how, when and where, depends on the life cycle of the household, on who is fit or sick, on who can do what, on what has already been done, on competing demands for the resources available, on past experience, on social conventions, and much else.

For their part, pastoralists too have to be dynamic and adaptable. Both nomads and transhumants are alert and nimble in searching for, finding and exploiting transient resources. Even when patterns and timings of movements have regular rhythms, each day and season has its own idiosyncratic sequence of improvisation. Herd management entails continuous appraisal, sensitive judgement, and at times very hard work. The environment in which the pastoralists operate is diverse, uncertain, and riddled with risks. Good decisions are matters of intensely considered judgement. Pastoralism is more than just a means of livelihood; it is an ecologically and socially complex and subtle art form.

Many livelihoods are forest-based or are diversified and supported by forests, woodlands and trees. The contribution of forest and woodlands to livelihoods is especially through non-timber forest products which provide a rich range of resources for livelihood strategies. Forest and woodland-based livelihoods are many and varied. Some livelihood sources can be specialised and sustained round much of the year. Many are seasonal.

Dimensions of Livelihoods

Livelihoods are usually diversified, based on more than either cultivation, or pastoralism, or forests. The degree to which poor people — both rural and urban — complicate and diversify their livelihood strategies can be illustrated in six dimensions: capability, person and activity, enterprise, social relationships, season, and interlinkages.

Capability: family members gain different skills which enable them to be versatile in response to changing conditions.

Person and activity: different members of a family, by gender, age, and aptitude and skill, undertake different tasks, and secure food and income in different environments and in different ways.

Enterprise: household and farm enterprises are multiplied, often with several types of livestock, several species of crop, many different vegetables and useful plants in home gardens, diverse food, fodder, fibre, medicines and other common property resources, the sale of a range of farm and garden products, craftwork, casual employment, and remittances.

Social relationships: people seek to maintain and extend personal relationships. Poor people need networks for small loans. Those with extended families have networks of mutuality and support. Those with few such relationships are "poor in people", like many refugees, displaced persons and settlers on settlement schemes.

Season: seasonality is a pervasive dimension, particularly, of the lives of the rural poor. Labour demand, disease, mortality, the variety, quality and quantity of food, domestic violence, livelihood activities, conception, pregnancy and birth, prices, income, expenditure, including school expenses and debt are only a few of the dimensions of deprivation and well-being which vary seasonally.[3]

Interlinkages: enterprises and activities are connected and sequenced so that they are mutually supporting.

Complicating and diversifying in these ways requires labour and management. We find women and men evolving farming systems which are non-linear, multi-storey, sequential, interactive, and mixed and managed in many different ways, forming and fitting micro-environments, making their land more heterogeneous and its enterprises

more diverse, and multiplying labour-intensive internal linkages. All these demand a continuity of intensive management. All move in the opposite direction to the simplifying, standardising management and labour-sparing farming systems of industrial and green revolution agriculture.

Complex and Diverse for Well-Being

Many poor people would like a job, and to enjoy the benefit of being an urban worker, a relatively affluent hedgehog. But for most, this is not a realist aspirator. Moreover, there are gains to be made from diversifying and complicating their livelihoods and farming systems. Three stand out: (i) the number, size and spread of livelihood flows; (ii) security; and (iii) well-being.

First, increased complexity and diversity in livelihood systems normally add to the number, size and spread of flows of food, income, and other resources. Sometimes this is through the addition of enterprises or activities; and sometimes (often with complex small-farming systems) through synergies which increase the flows from existing enterprises.

Increased diversity can also spread livelihood flows more evenly across the seasons. Poor people pick enterprises and activities which fit their seasonal slacks. Activities in agricultural off-seasons can slow or avert the rundown of stocks or the build-up of debt, or even add to stocks and reduce debt. Food for work and other public works are often vital in filling in gaps in productive work. For many, sources of food and income during the rains and before harvest are critical, since this is when food is shortest and damaging debts most often incurred. For those who live near the margin, food and income flows at such times are often the key to a sustainable livelihood.

Second, complex and diverse livelihood and farming systems reduce vulnerability and enhance security. Security

here means freedom from threats or loss. Livelihood security, the opposite of vulnerability, depends most obviously on the physical, social and economic environment, and on the means and ability to deal with stress and shocks without damaging loss. In this, livelihood capabilities, tangible assets (stocks) and intangible assets (claims and access) play their part. Stability means the steadiness and dependability of livelihood flows, and sustainability the ability to maintain or improve a level of living and quality of life.

That this is often not appreciated by professionals may be explained by the mental models of machines and the controlled tidiness of normal science. A complex machine is vulnerable to a fault in any one of its parts. The motor car, as all garage mechanics know and most owners sooner or later learn, can go wrong in many ways. There is some redundancy in the spare wheel, the sparking plugs and cylinders, sometimes in a reserve fuel tank, meaning that if one fails, another can take its place. But with the battery, cooling systems, carburettor, steering and transmission systems, one fault is usually enough to stop the whole machine.

In contrast, redundancy is inherent in the complexity and diversity alike of ecosystems, and of many farming systems and livelihood systems. With these, the more diverse their parts and the more complex their linkages, so the more they tend to be buffered against shocks and failures. If one enterprise or activity fails, another can take its place: when the bottom falls out of the market for one vegetable or livestock product, others can be substituted; if a crop fails as a whole, there are wild foods. Herders in Mongolia responded to new uncertainties in markets and prices for livestock which came with privatisation by diversifying their herds in species and also in composition. If one productive asset is lost or destroyed, others are a fall back: if the cattle die, there are still sheep or goats; if the sheep or goats die, hens, eggs and honey can still be sold. If one internal linkage weakens, others can supplement it: when animals run out of grazing,

or fish run short of feed, they can be fed crop stover, or tree leaf fodder, or weeds, or other gathered organic materials. So resource-poor farmers and herders seek to reduce risks by adding to their enterprises, accumulating varied assets, and multiplying linkages and maintaining fallback resources and activities. Faced with uncertain conditions, farmers and herders diversify.

Uncertainty-reducing diversity and complexity can be misunderstood because they often look untidy. Staggered planting can appear haphazard and messy, but reduces losses if there is a dry spell. Micro-environments can look chaotic, but human-made micro-climates tend to be stable and smoothing compared with the ambient environment. Really intensive home gardens can seem shambolic. Yet they often manifest the sensitive creation and management of niches which change as plants grow. The diversity of plants in them is habitually underestimated: a rule of thumb is that the number of useful species in a home garden will be double the number guessed by the visitor before counting. With field crops, variability and diversity reduce the threat of pests,[4] while mono-cultures are more vulnerable. Intercropping often reduces the risks of loss of either crop.

Neat standardization and straight contrast in lines are vulnerable. The straight lines or row planting of industrial and green revolution agriculture, and even of allotment gardeners in temperate climates, sometimes make little sense to farmers in difficult tropical conditions. Farmers in Machakos District in Kenya were advised to plant their maize in rows, but reverted to their tradition of triangles in order to intercrop with their fallback crop of cassava in the middle of the triangles. And in Kilifi District, a farmer explained: "It is always the same, when I plant in straight lines, if there are mice, they start eating at one end and move on swiftly straight down the line, and I quickly lose the whole crop. I always replant randomly because there is a greater chance that less seeds will be found by the mice this way"

(cited in Porter, Allen and Thompson 1991:197). There is method in the muddle.

So we can conclude, with Francis Shaxon, that "The more diverse and complex an agricultural system, the more stable and sustainable it will be in the face of unpredictable vagaries of climate and the market" (Shaxon 1993). Diversity spreads risks by adding species, enterprises and activities; and complexity reduces uncertainty through multiple linkages and redundancy.

A *third* aspect of diversity habitually overlooked by normal professionals is well-being.

Increases in the number, size and spread of livelihood flows, and the greater security they bring, contribute in a direct physical and physiological manner to well-being.

Diversity serves economic and social independence. The more sources of food and income a household has, the less it has to rely on any single one. The more varied the employment or productive work available, the less the danger of exploitation by one provider — a single patron or business. If a local employer gives a bad deal, there is work on construction in town, or in the brick factory, or harvesting elsewhere. Such options improve bargaining power, and so wages and incomes. Socially and psychologically, too, diversity liberates: diversity for lowers diminishes domination by uppers and enhances independence and self-respect.

Diversity also enhances well-being through the quality of experience.[5] Most people in most cultures might agree that variety is a part of the good life. It is, though, no part of normal economic valuation.

Professionals' Perceptions

This understanding of the complexity and diversity of livelihood strategies sharpens understanding of the

contrasts between the knowledge of many professionals and that of local people. Much diversity is unseen or undervalued by persons coming from outside. The seasonal dimension and its significance are underperceived by season-proofed professionals. An oversimple impression is given by visits concentrated at certain times of the year, notably in the dry season after harvest, missing the intensive activities of the rains when there is more work, less food, more sickness, and greater need to exercise ingenuity.

Other interlocking professional and personal biases focus their attention on what is larger-scale, uniform, accessible, marketed, in the modern economy. Agriculturists tend to notice and concern themselves with field crops on flat fields, to the neglect of micro-environments on slopes, in hollows, or in home gardens. Non- timber forest products (NTFP) for the livelihoods of the local poor were for long described as "minor" forest products, while timber and poles for the distant rich were "major" (Chambers, Saxena and Shah 1989:143-169). Mono-cultures and plantations are accessible, large-scale, modern, marketed, and easy to inspect. NTFPs are dispersed in forests, small-scale, often "traditional" and consumed by households, and out of sight.

Male bias pervasively overlooks and undervalues diversity. Most outsider professionals are still men, and tend to meet and interact with men. Whatever is larger-scale, marketed and modern is more likely to be managed by men than women. Most local diversity is managed by women. Home gardens are pre-eminently a domain of women, close to the home or hut, a source and haven of often astonishing biodiversity with plants of many species and uses; NTFP's are mainly collected by women; domestic livestock, large and small, including chickens are usually tended mainly by women. But these activities carried out by women are small-scale and scattered. They are also unseen because their products are not marketed, or are marketed on a dispersed and intermittent small scale. It is also often women who

physically manage the internal organic linkages of farming systems, variously cutting, carrying, feeding, tending and applying the fodder grasses, tree fodder, crop residues, domestic animals, organic manure and composting which complicate and diversify farming systems. To all these tendencies, exceptions can surely be found. But in most contexts, it is women, more than men, who manage and maintain biological and livelihood diversity.

Change and process are also underperceived by outsiders. The learning of scientists tends to be stepwise; that of local people incremental. Local people are continuously observing and experiencing. Farmers have a dynamic knowledge system "which co-evolves with the dynamics of the complex biological systems which underlie agricultural technology and production" (Hall and Clark 1995:1611). Farmers constantly learn and unlearn, disciplined by the rigour of struggle for livelihood. Scientists often rely on averages, which slows learning about change; the knowledge of local people is more dynamic and up-to-date, continually revised as conditions change. Patrick Sikana (1994:81) found in Zambia that farmers' perception of the fertility status of a particular soil changed constantly, taking into consideration the factors which favoured or impeded crop performance, such as plot age, location and previous use, weed infestation and pest build-up. Similarly, Gerard Gill (1991) analysed data presented in 45 minutes in a PRA mode by a group of farmers in Maramche village in Nepal. He compared it with 20 years rainfall data from the nearby Lumle Regional Agricultural Research Centre and concluded that "insofar as scientifically-collected rainfall statistics represent the 'real' data, then information supplied by the Maramche farmers represents a remarkably good approximation". As with soils in Zambia, or rainfall in Nepal, so too generally, farmers' perceptions, compared with those of scientists, are more evolutionary and dynamic, changing as local realities change.

WHOSE REALITIES AND PRIORITIES COUNT?

We are concerned here with different epistemologies. To summarize and to polarise: the realities of scientists and large farmers are universal, simple, standardised, stable, and controllable; the realities of small and poor farmers, pastoralists, and forest-dwellers are locally specific, complex, diverse, dynamic, and difficult to control. Scientists learn intermittently in conditions which are simplified and controlled. Local people learn continuously in conditions which are complex and uncontrolled. Their realities differ. The question is: whose realities, whose priorities, count?

Whose Time Horizon?

It is a common prejudice among the non-poor that poor people are improvident and live a "hand-to-mouth" existence. In part, this is seen as moral defect; in part, as strategy for survival. It is generally believed that those who are indigent and desperate, who "do not know where the next meal is coming from" are inherently unable to take the long view of professionals and elites.

Much empirical evidence is, however, strikingly contrary. To be sure, there are many — those who are displaced, refugees, destitute, abandoned, chronically sick and disabled — who are forced to focus on immediate survival. But they usually wish to take a long view, and struggle to do so by safeguarding their livelihoods and investing labour for the long-term.

Numerous examples suggest that poor people show tenacity and self-sacrifice in safeguarding the basis of their livelihoods. Again and again, it is found that small farmers with secure rights in land invest their labour for the long-term. They do this in shaping land, terracing and creating fertile micro-environments; in harvesting water, silt and nutrients; and in planting and protecting trees. The terraced rice paddies on sloped land in many parts of Asia are spectacular evidence, so widespread that it is easily

overlooked. Less visible, but equally striking, are silt deposition fields throughout much of the semi-arid tropics. For these, farmers build up, year by year, barriers of stones which harvest silt to create protected highly fertile micro-environments providing much higher and stable yields than other land (see e.g. Wilken 1987). When conditions are right, farmers terrace rainfed land and plant trees, as in Machakos District and elsewhere in Kenya (Tiffen, Mortimore and Gichuki 1994). The planting and protecting of trees as long-term savings (Chambers and Leach 1989) is again widespread evidence of actions which take the long view.

Similarly, pastoralists and livestock herders have long-term strategies. They balance the composition of their herds and flocks. Breeding strategies can be very long-term. High altitude herders in the Himalaya-Karakorum region cross-breed yak and cattle to optimise balances of characteristics adapted to different altitudes. Desirable herd composition depends on many factors including markets, the availability of grazing, and labour. Their strategies take account of characteristics of females and males, and whether these are yak or cattle or hybrids of what sort. As Patrick Robinson observes:

> When a major change takes place in the desired herd composition, it can take many years of investment with little return before a new balance of breeding and productive stock is developed locally or stimulated from other areas" [Robinson, 1993:148].

Benign caricature could mislead. There is a danger of portraying the perfectly rational poor person who always takes the long view, investing with foresight in distant income streams for the benefit of future generations. There are poor people, as there are rich, who are profligate, make mistakes, and have bad luck. The point is that the penalties for them and their children are vastly higher. So much more is at stake than for the rich. The well-off can afford to be short-sighted; the poor cannot. It is, then, not surprising that so

many, on so vast a scale, strive to safeguard and invest for their future livelihoods.

Contrary to popular belief, it is less the poor and weak and more the rich and powerful who take the short-term view. Conventional economists discount future benefits: the further benefits are in the future, the less they are worth now. Commercial businesses want early returns on capital invested. Contractors grab fast bucks by clear-felling forest and getting timber out quick. Government officials strive to spend votes and achieve targets by the end of each financial year. Staff transferable between districts expect short assignments; lacking incentives to launch long-term development, and fearing their successors will neglect what they start, they opt for actions with quick results. For their part, politicians constantly court popularity and set their sights no further than the next election.[6] In various ways, then, all these among the relatively rich and powerful are driven to take the short view: by professional methods and norms, by shareholders, by interest rates on loans, by the imperatives of capital, by government procedures and practices, by the frequency of transfers and elections, and by prudence, realism and greed. It is less the rich, secure and strong, and more the poor, vulnerable and weak, who struggle and strive to take the long view.

WHOSE CONCEPT OF WELL-BEING?

There is a tendency among the professionals to simplify complex reality to a single measurable concept to facilitate comparison and analysis. Levels of consumption or income are assessed through questionnaire surveys and related to poverty lines. The relative position of an individual, household, community, region or country can then be identified on a per capita basis. Consumption is commonly assumed to be a proxy for income, so the scale is described as one of per capita income. Many professionals, economists and others recognise and use other complementary measures; but many, too, for practical purposes, in thought, speech,

writing and planning, make the short step to taking per capita income as the prime indicator for well-being.

The approaches and methods of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (Chambers 1992) have led to the expression of local realities which are much more varied, many-sided and nuanced. Wealth or well-being ranking involves local people card sorting households into piles. It is either preceded, or followed, or both, by a discussion of criteria. Matrix scoring of livelihood activities is another way in which criteria and values are elicited and expressed. The complex and diverse local realities so expressed challenge and qualify both the assessment and the primacy of income-poverty.

The assessment of income-poverty is difficult and often flawed. It is typically based on questionnaire surveys which tend to be slow, costly, inaccurate and low in credibility. Consumption the same as income, wealth or well-being.

Beyond that, PRA methods have shown proxy indicators to be surprisingly misleading. Quality of housing, tin roofs, number of rooms, occupation, number of items of clothing, furniture, and land holding size, have been assumed to be good proxies for wealth or income. But exceptions prove to be numerous. To give an example, in a slum in San Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, it was found that those in better housing were considered worse off, having to rent, while those in cardboard boxes were considered better-off, living on land they owned. In a careful and detailed investigation in South India, it was found that a questionnaire survey using five proxy indicators chosen by professionals led to misclassification of 35 per cent of households.[7] Or again, in Sri Lanka in December 1994, a villager explained why a government programme to help the poor had often identified the wrong people: some had bad houses but were well-off; one had inherited a nice looking house but was weak and poor; one very poor family was classified as non-poor because the surveyor recorded a radio cassette player

given by a relative who had been to the Gulf. Outsiders' surveys often miss or misinterpret major elements in wealth and income. Local people's assessments are more knowledgeable and nuanced. They can include, for example, remittances from relatives, differences in types of loan and debt and repaying capacity, different forms of ownership, mortgaging, loaning, borrowing and benefiting from land, and the same for livestock, repeated expenditures for health treatment, and multifarious access to common property resources. Outsiders' proxy indicators often misfit, miss much, and mislead.

The primacy of income-poverty has been repeatedly challenged and qualified by sensitive research, and by wealth and well-being ranking. Local people value much besides income. The classic study by N.S. Jodha (1988) in two villages in Rajasthan has been much quoted as a seminal source of this insight. Jodha asked his respondents for their own categories and criteria of changing economic status. They named 38 criteria. Comparing data from his fieldwork in 1964-66 with that of 1982-84, he found that the 36 households which were more than 5 per cent worse-off in per capita real incomes were on average better-off according to 37 out of 38 of their own criteria. The criteria included not having to migrate for work, not having to skip a third meal during the lean period, and several indicators of social and economic independence of patrons.

Jodha's insights have since been repeatedly illuminated and validated, in a kaleidoscope of variety by wealth or well-being ranking. Wealth ranking in its classic form (Grandin 1988) involved asking local people to pile sort cards on which households are listed into those who were rich, middle and poor, using a single criterion of wealth as the measure. It is perhaps no coincidence that the wealth ranking, which was seminal for much current practice, was conducted among Maasai in Kenya for whom wealth was a key concept reflected in numbers of cattle, meeting outsiders'

preference for a single measure. Elsewhere in the world, local analysts have repeatedly rejected "wealth" and used their own composite criterion, often close to "well-being". In parts of North India, for example, the concepts of "*sukhi*" (happy) and "*dukhi*" (unhappy) are used; and they cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

Well-being ranking enables local people to express their own, more knowledgeable and more complex reality. It is now rare for them to group people according to "wealth". If they do, other values may be mentioned. In a well-being ranking in Ghana, "god-fearing" was a separate criterion from wealth, and included some from all-wealth categories — rich, medium, poor and assetless. In Zimbabwe, Scoones (1995:85) found that "prestige, respect, esteem, conduct, behaviour and local political influence may be significant in ranking a particular household and act to trade-off against potentially lower asset or income levels" and concluded that "Wealth and well-being are thus complex and dynamic, with multiple local meanings and interpretations."

Well-being emerges as multidimensional, a conflation of many criteria. When they first place cards for households in piles, and then describe their reasons, analysts often reveal ten or more criteria and indicators. Many indicators of ill-being are mentioned: having to skip meals in the lean season, having more mouths-to-feed and fewer hands to help (the dependency ratio), being unable to send children to school, having to put children in employment, being dependent on common property resources, having to accept low status or demeaning work, social isolation and being poor in people, being unable decently to bury the dead. Again and again, health and physical and mental well-being are significant. Bad habits like alcoholism and other addictions feature repeatedly, as does the physical ill-being of the disabled or chronically sick.

Income, the reductionist criterion of normal economists, has never, in my experience or in the evidence I

have been able to review, been given explicit primacy. People refer to concepts such as the Hindi "*sukhi-dukhi*", or the Ghanaian "god-fearing" which express a summation of many dimensions, some or all of which are non-material. Even when facilitators try to focus on wealth or income, analysts again and again insist on more complex combinations of criteria of well-being.

In a PRA process in a Pakistan village in April 1994:

> the local people did a matrix of their existing sources of income to determine the preferred income source. Interestingly, for me, the criterion "more income" was the 9th or 10th one listed (out of a total of about 20 criteria). "More time at home", "ability to get involved in neighbours' joys and sorrows" were listed earlier...the generally perceived-to-be preferred source of income (high paying skilled/manual labour in the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Dubai) did not emerge as victor..., the reason worked out by the local analysts being that it did badly on their social criteria [personal communication Rashida Dohad].

Reporting on a discussion with rural residents in Zambia Delia Paul said:

> One of the things we found in the village which surprised us was people's idea of well-being and how that related to having money. We talked to a family, asking them to rank everybody in the village from the richest to the poorest and asking them why they would rank somebody as being well-off, somebody as being less well-off, and someone as poor. And we found that in that analysis money meant very little to the people. The person who was ranked as poorest in the village was a man who was probably the only person who was receiving a salary. But that did not count to the villagers because he did not have cattle, he was not married, and he did not have any children. So the money on its own did not sort of mean anything. What was

> important was that they could have a certain lifestyle, that they were able to entertain with generosity, and that there were many children around them.

In a community in Bulgaria a master builder, who had been invited to rank people according to wealth, found that people:

> ...spontaneously enlarged the list of well-being criteria emphasising the importance of children's education, good health and a good humoured nature. The villager then picked up the name cards and sorted the cards into three piles. Interestingly, the less well-off group included the most wealthy person of the village — an unhappy, bad tempered fellow — who was put at the bottom of the pile along with the drunks and sick [BSCRM and WWF-International 1995:24].

I do not intend to undervalue income as a means to achieving other objectives. The point I wish to make is that in local people's reality much matters besides wealth and income; and other criteria — sickness, disability, dependence, being unable to fulfil social obligations, being "poor in people", and being a miserable sort, are frequently mentioned. Values and aspirations of people are complex and diverse; and they cannot be known by outsiders without asking, without enabling local people freely to undertake and share their own analysis. When a poor rural woman in Zambia was asked what her dream was, she said it was to have time to go to the town and spend time with her friends.[8]

WHOSE PREFERENCES AND CRITERIA?

It is not just the time horizons and values of professionals and local people that frequently differ. They often differ in their preferences and criteria of assessment. What local people, especially the poor, want and need, is often not what they are thought by professionals to want and need, or what professionals themselves want. Six disparate examples can give some sense of the range of such differences.

• **Basic needs: whose list?** The ILO listing of basic needs (ILO 1976:7) included food, shelter, clothing, access to essential services such as safe drinking-water, sanitation, transport, health and education, and an adequately remunerated job for those able and willing to work. It did not include access to basic consumer goods. One imagines that those who drew up the list had never experienced, or perhaps even imagined, a situation in which there would not be things in shops to buy. But a rural study in Tanzania carried out for a Basic Needs Mission to Tanzania found widespread non-availability of basic goods such as salt, sugar, soap, matches, batteries and blankets. The Mission concluded that "There seems little doubt that if villagers were pressed to give priorities to their main needs the first place would have gone to the supply of essential consumer goods" (ILO 1982:285).

• **Seed-breeding: whose criteria?** The contrasting physical, economic and social conditions of scientists and of resource-poor farmers have long been recognised. Scientists on research stations and in laboratories seek peer approval and promotion. Resource-poor farmers on their farms seek livelihoods and survival. Their realities differ radically. Yet many scientists have assumed that they know best what farmers need. For many, much has now changed since the green revolution days when scientists competed for maximum yield with high inputs. It is questionable, though, how much scientists take note of the range and weightings of farmers' criteria for varieties in their "baskets of choice". For farmers' criteria are typically many (see e.g. Ashby et al. 1989; the Women of Sangams Pastapur and Pimbert 1991; Drinkwater 1993; Tamang 1993). Common criteria include early maturation (shortening the hungry season), pest resistance, ease of weeding, fodder

quantity and quality, drought resistance, ease of processing, price, storability, cooking quality, and taste.

Two examples of divergent preferences revealed through matrix scoring can be cited. In Andhra Pradesh, after matrix scoring pigeon pea varieties against ten criteria, women farmers indicated that they would not again grow an ICRISAT released variety, despite its higher yield and greater pest resistance, because of its bitter-seed taste (The Women of Sangams Pastapur and Pimbert 1991). When a farmer in Botswana matrix scored five varieties of sorghum, he included tillering (branching) as a positive criterion. The facilitating scientist was astonished: scientists had taken tillering as negative, and had been breeding to reduce or eliminate it.

- **Animals and neighbours: whose problems?** In Sulawesi, Indonesia, in 1992, five groups of livestock staff identified and matrix scored characteristics of different domestic animals — ducks, chickens, goats, horses, buffalo and cattle. Subsequently, villagers repeated the exercise, freely identifying the characteristics that mattered to them. The staff had only one sort of duck; the villagers two. Their scores differed for the same characteristic: staff gave chicken meat 6 against villagers' 10, and horse meat 4 against villagers' 7. None of the staff listed a criterion critical for the villagers: causing trouble or conflict with neighbours. Manila ducks were extreme for this, scoring 11 out of 10 against 6 out of 10 for local ducks; and goats were so bad that the village had banned them altogether.[9]

- **Firewood: whose deficiency?** In Tanzania, no trees by 1990 was foreseen in a professional projection. An ILO (1982) Basic Needs Mission was surprised that field investigations indicated no danger of

deforestation although at the national level this had become a problem. Some years later, in Mwanza District, the Tanzania Government, the World Bank, and initially the ODA of the British Government, all wanted a forestry project. A local NGO carried out a listening survey. Of 8,000 village conversations recorded, only three mentioned timber, fuelwood or other tree products (Flint 1991).[10] In the Usambara mountains, even in the 1980s, the perception of outsiders was of forest being destroyed by local people under the pressure of population; the reality reported by a social anthropologist was of people eager and willing to plant trees, both on their own land and to recreate forest (Johansson 1992). For part of Guinea, "Rural villagers rarely consider firewood availability to be a problem" and in one area women's access to fuelwood had improved (Leach and Fairhead Nov 92:10 and 27). In many parts of the world, it would seem, the response to loss of trees in forests has been agroforestry — trees on farms, planted and protected, often for other purposes, but also providing fuelwood (see e.g. Scheer 1995). In Tanzania, not only were there still trees standing in 1995, but locally, as in parts of Kenya, there may have been more than before, with firewood more accessible because closer to the homestead.

• **Forest development: whose priorities?** In Haryana in India, researchers asked foresters and community management groups to rank order their preferences for 23 forest development investment strategies (SPWD 1992:83-4). Some of the contrast in priorities is summarised in the following table:

Ranking of Priorities for Forest Development Investments
by Forest Department Staff and Community Management Groups

Forest Dept. staff		Community Management Groups
Trenches	1	20
Checkdams	2	17
Gabion checkdams	3	18
Gully plugs	4	21
Jamun	23	5
Guava	22	4
Dholu/Sarala + fruit	19	3
Dholu/Sarala	13	2
Bhabbar	12	1

The foresters' first four options were physical works on the land — trenches, checkdams, gabion checkdams, and gully plugs, all ranked near bottom by the communities. The first five preferences of the communities were all useful plants — bhabbar grass, dholu/sarala, dholu/sarala + fruit, guava, and jamun. The foresters' bottom five choices were all trees, but they were trees for fruit (which people would enjoy) not timber (which they would market).

• **Trees on farms: whose reality?** In a study over nearly four years in Pakistan, M.R. Dove (1992) compared foresters' beliefs about farmers with farmers' realities. The comparison went far to explain problems with a nation-wide social forestry project for tree-planting by farmers. Foresters' beliefs and small farmers realities differed over the size of farmers interested, the types of trees wanted, the uses of the trees, the obstacles to planting, the preferred time of planting, and whether fuelwood would reduce dung-burning.

Few, if any, of those who drew up the ILO's list of basic needs can ever have been unable to buy basic goods. None of those who bred crops for high yield in high input conditions is likely ever to have been a resource-poor farmer. It is improbable that any of those who projected the fuelwood crisis had lived in a village and cooked with biomass. The reality expressed by the Sulawesi livestock staff in an office situation was not that of people living in villages whose animals cause trouble with neighbours. Forest Department staff in Haryana preferred forest investments which they would control, involving short-term physical works, and long-term gains from timber, both perhaps contributing to their unofficial incomes, as against fruit tree growing which might imply community rights and contribute to the incomes and livelihood flows of local people. Foresters in Pakistan derived their beliefs both from their professional training, and from meetings which were "rigorously restricted to a tiny fraction of the rural population, namely, the rural elite" (Dove 1992:32).

In each case, professionals projected and asserted their reality and interests, and ignored, failed to appreciate, or opposed those of local people. Their normal professionalism, distance, dominance, selective perceptions, personal interests, and life experiences variously combined to mislead. It is scarcely surprising, on reflection, that professionals at international conferences, on research stations and in laboratories, in offices with computers, and working in a transfer-of-technology mode, have different criteria and preferences from local people. Their life experiences, their working environments, their values, their reward systems, their livelihood strategies, and their personal interests all differ. There is no way the realities they construct could be the same.

WHO COUNTS WITHIN A COMMUNITY?

Outsider professionals treat local communities as homogeneous. Policy documents and project proposals

advocate "community participation". Visitors to villages and slums assume that those whom they meet represent "the community". Following Alice Welbourn (1991), four major axes of difference can be seen: of age, gender, ethnic or social group, and poverty; and there are always other differences, of capability and disability, of education, of livelihood strategy, of types of assets, and of much else. Those whom outsiders meet and interact with are most likely to be middle-aged or youths, male, from dominant groups, and economically better-off. And often their criteria, preferences and priorities are taken as those of the whole community; but the community includes those who are weaker and worse off —children, the very old, females, social inferiors, subordinate groups, the disabled, and those who are vulnerable and poor.

The sensitive and committed use of PRA approaches and methods has repeatedly confirmed that different groups, households and individuals within a community have different criteria, preferences and priorities. This has been demonstrated through combinations and sequences of participatory mapping, seasonal calendars, causal and linkage diagramming, matrix scoring and ranking, Venn diagramming, well-being ranking and other methods, carried out by different individuals and groups (see e.g. Welbourn 1991; Swift and Umar 1991; Redd Barna 1993; Guijt, Fuglesang and Kisadha 1994).

There are, of course, commonalities of interest.[11] The illustrations which follow emphasise differences. The point is that until tests for difference have been made, commonalities or consensus cannot be assumed; and those who are younger or very old, female, of low status groups, and/or poor, deprived, disabled and weak, will tend to be left out unless care is taken to find them and bring them in. The axes interlock. As Alice Welbourn points out:

> If we speak to the "women's group", we often fail to recognise that these women tend to be the wives of better-off, more influential men in the community. The single mothers, the divorcees, the poorer wives tend to be excluded from such groups on the basis of economic well-being, moral standing or just age [Welbourn, 1991].

On age, Welbourn (1991:16-18) found that young and old express different realities and priorities. In Bangladesh, young men mapped the paths and railway they used to go for work, while the old men showed the boundaries of land lost to the river but to which they still laid claim. In a village in Sierra Leone, Welbourn intervened to stop young men leaving a meeting in disgust. Old men were giving their priorities. The young men felt theirs would be once again neglected. They were persuaded to stay. It later emerged that the old men wanted a new bridge to get across the river to their land, and a new mosque; the young men wanted a school and football goal posts.

On gender, the different knowledges, perceptions and priorities of women and men have been extensively expressed through PRA methods. No generalizations are likely to be valid everywhere, but some contrasts are common. Women and men know and show in their diagrams and calendars more about what touches their lives and the activities they engage in. Women know more about, and attach more importance to, people — who lives where, how many there are in a family, health status and the like — and show this in social maps. Men know more about surrounding resources and towns, and show this in resource maps. In drawing maps of the same environment, those of women and men often differ significantly, showing the different places they visit and that matter to them, and their differing concerns and priorities. PRA procedures, using matrix scoring of trees, have been evolved to enable women and men in a community to state separately the relative numbers they would like of species of their choice. Women and men separately allocate 100 seeds or stones to the species they

want. A negotiation (often, it seems, good humoured) then takes place between the two groups.

Such gender differences have been illuminated through PRA methods: in Kenya, men's and women's rights of ownership and access; in Bangladesh, differences in type and amount of foods consumed by month for women and men, and for a girl child and boy child; in Zimbabwe, differences of weighting criteria in matrix scoring of different grain crops. "Not only are women's and men's cash flows separate and very different from each other, but they also face different points of seasonal stress in terms of their livelihoods" (Shah 1993:18). PRA methods have potential for the analysis of the sometimes obstinately obscure area of intra-household allocations and relations.

Women and men also express different values in identifying those they consider poor or badly off. In an Indian village, men chose male-headed households when identifying the poorest; the women identified two widows, one of whom was blind in one eye (Mukherjee 1993:105). For the men, assets and employment opportunities were more important (the two widows had access to some land); for the women, physical and social condition was more important.

On ethnic or social group, social mappers in India almost always try to differentiate households by caste. The groups are often residentially clustered. Interests and priorities can be not just different, but antagonistic, as between cultivators and pastoralists in the same village in parts of Gujarat in India. The extent of difference by social group possible within the same community is shown by the findings of a participatory assessment of women's problems and concerns in Morocco (Shah and Bouravach 1995:102).

On poverty and deprivation, Jeremy Swift and Abdi Noor Umar (1991) note that public meetings tend to be dominated by one or two people who are often not representative of the community as a whole, and that it would be wrong anyway to expect communities, stratified by

wealth, age, gender and occupation, to have a single view of priorities. In their work with the pastoral Boran people in Kenya, wealth or well-being ranking was first used, and then focused group discussions held with wealth groups — rich, middle and poor, using a problem and solution game with holes in the ground, similar to a traditional game familiar to the Boran. The results, from 24 groups of the rich, 17 of the middle, and 27 of the poor, show striking contrasts. The problems and solutions of the poor were more diverse.

Differences between communities are also often sharp. A comparison of 12 villages in the same district in South India found striking contrasts between all of them. There is a common dichotomy in India between villages which are accessible, larger, with irrigated land and greater social inequalities, and those which are "remote", smaller, with rainfed agriculture, and less marked social inequalities.

Differences between communities, within communities by age, gender, social group and poverty and wealth, and how they cross-cut, are almost universal, and universally significant. Being aware of them is part of good facilitation. It may be essential to find those who are excluded, and to bring them into a participatory process, or help them to generate their own. It can also be part of a good strategy to find issues which are in everyone's interest and which can bring people together. There is a time for coming together around common interests; but the bigger challenge is to recognise and support diversity, complexity and multiple realities, and to empower those who are weaker and excluded.

PROFESSIONAL REVERSALS

Normal professionalism misfits with the realities of the people. To polarise can be to caricature. Interactions between uppers and lowers generally, and between professionals and the poor in particular, are varied, often nuanced, and spread across a whole range of different relationships. Exceptions could be found to almost every

attempt at bald summary. To achieve responsible well-being, livelihood, capabilities, equity and sustainability the reversal of the normal is required: from centre to periphery; from simple to complex; from uniform to diverse. This means that for many people, especially among the poor, responsible well-being has to be defined much less for people, and much more by them, through social analysis and dialogue; that many livelihoods have to be based on local conditions and resources; that capabilities have to be varied and fitting for each environment and strategy; that equity has to be nurtured and negotiated; and that sustainability has to be sought through participation.

These reversals challenge those who work in development. They have implications for organizations and their procedures and cultures; for professions and their training and values; and for individuals and their behaviours and attitudes. They support an evolving paradigm of action, of reversals of the normal.

In this paradigm, the key reversal is of normal dominance. It is for uppers to empower lowers — local people and the poor, and to privilege their realities and priorities. This demands changes in the behaviour and attitudes of uppers — the centrally placed, the powerful, the non-poor. Part of this is generosity and altruism, putting the last first; beyond this, the paradigm implies disempowerment, in which uppers put themselves, the first, last. This means changes: of role from teacher to facilitator; of behaviour and attitudes from superiority to service; and of personal satisfactions from dominating to enabling.

Disempowerment does not have to be a zero-sum situation, in which one person's gain is another's loss. For there are many satisfactions and rewards in enabling others. The search now has to be for "win-win" solutions in which all sense that they gain. In the words of one of 15 solutions generated by participants at FAO's 50th anniversary symposium in Quebec in October 1995, the challenge is:

to develop and implement approaches and methods to enable professionals, at all levels in organisations, and in interaction with farmers and the food-insecure, to adopt behaviour and attitudes which are truly participatory, non-dominating and empowering.

To the extent that is achieved, it will be less the reality of uppers, those who are central and powerful, and much more the reality of lowers, those who are marginalized and poor, that comes to count.

Notes

[1]Attributed to Archilochus.

[2]This list of common property resources only picks up some of the main types of place to which poor people can have access. There are many others, such as railway lines, canal banks and road reserves. Convention often allows access to certain items such as wild fruits on private land (e.g. blackberries in the UK). In some African cities people collect and eat the insects which fall to the ground under lamp- posts after dark.

[3]Seasonal dimensions of rural poverty have a substantial literature, briefly reviewed at the end of Chambers 1993:40-59. See e.g. Schofield 1974, Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey 1981, Longhurst 1986, Huss-Ashmore 1988, Sahn 1989, Walker and Ryan 1990, Gill 1991, and Ulijaszek and Strickland 1993

[4]There is a counter case here, which is the way in which pests can buildup with staggered cultivation, whereas with synchronised cultivation they lack time to reproduce before their chances are over.

[5]As a boy I had huge pleasure in picking, storing and selling some 40 varieties of apples from an orchard (now a housing estate). There was delight in the diversity of names (Newton Wonder, Charles Ross, Beauty of Bath, Worcester Permain, Allington Pippin, Russett, Bramley, Blenheim...), and in their differences of shape, size, colour, taste, time of ripening, ease of picking, ease of bruising, storability, ease of sale, and the prices I could get for them.

[6] Galbraith, in *The Culture of Contentment* (1992:20-22), points out that for politicians "In the briefest word, short-run public inaction, even if held to be alarming as to consequence, is always preferred to protective long-run action." Present cost and taxation are specific; the benefits are future and dispersed, and those who might benefit are "later and different individuals".

[7] The study by Rajaratnam et al (1993) reveals many subtleties in the judgements made by villagers, and explains the basis on which the questionnaire survey results were considered erroneous. A short summary is in Chambers 1994:1259.

[8] The source is the video *The P1² Report: Walking in Their Shoes*, World Vision, Australia, 1993.

[9] I have posed this as a teaser to perhaps four hundred people in the course of PRA training sessions, offering about £5 to anyone getting the answer, with ten guesses. I have only once lost the money, and that was with a somewhat generous interpretation of the guess. It will be a test of whether anyone reads this text to see if I now start losing.

[10] ODA did not fund the project.

[11] Irene Guijt has pointed out the strategic importance of enabling people to identify what she calls "catalytic" priorities — actions about which people can agree and which will bring them together as an initial step.

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